

TWIN FALLS

Academy teaches youths how to be chefs

By Jennifer Liebrum

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HAILEY -- When Joyce Pratt summoned her students to "get our coats on," she wasn't protecting them from inclement weather or a chemical experiment. But she was teaching a science.

"Today, you are going to make a cake and you will practice decorating it," the Culinary Arts Academy teacher said during a recent session at Wood River High School. "I'm grading it. I want to see some expertise. Now, let's get our coats on."

Cake baking may hearken some back to the days of home economics a la Betty Crocker, but this isn't your mama's homemaking class.

"We prefer to say we are teaching them life skills," Pratt said recently, herself a fashion merchandising expert with a degree in family and consumer science and a minor in life science.

The academy, one of several specialized education programs offered by the high school to help students choose careers, is only two years old, but already has trained winners.

Several Culinary Arts chefs have earned a chance to compete in a national culinary cook-off this week in California. The honor caps a year of wins for the program's students, who took second at the College of Southern Idaho Culinary competition in February and three golds at Boise State University's Culinary Competition in April.

Three students and Pratt are at the National Family, Career and Community Leaders of America's Leadership conference and culinary arts competition today through Wednesday in San Diego, where they will seek a national title.

Such wins are the gravy of partaking in the Culinary Arts Academy, but the aim of the academies -- which include architectural and mechanical design, business and finance, information technology, Jim Woodyard residential construction, performing arts and teaching -- is to help students learn a trade and perhaps identify a direction that otherwise might not be explored.

"I had a student who dropped out," Pratt said. "At first I was discouraged, but then I realized that that is what the academy is all about, finding out if this is your area of interest."

In her 15 years of teaching, Pratt said she was distressed to find that life skills such as cooking had fallen by the wayside.

"Even if they don't choose a career in food, it gives them a tangible skill," she said. "For those who do continue, the business world will be able to see that they are prepared."

In addition to cooking, students learn all aspects of food service, from sanitation to preparation, how to operate on a budget and the many ways the skills can apply in the real world.

"People hear cooking and they think 'chef,' but there are jobs as hospital nutritionists, writing cookbooks, food photography and being a private chef," Pratt explained. "It alerts kids to all the possibilities."

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